Situated identities and literacy pratices: to seem and to feel

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Abstract

This article examines the centrality of cultural resources or *artifacts* in the social process of "doing literacy." Relying on recent developments in sociocultural theories of continuous identity formation, I argue that people employ cultural artifacts to "seem" literate, or to be seen as literate by others, and to "feel" literate, that is, to develop a sense of themselves as literate. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil, I show how youth and adult literacy students use cultural artifacts in their efforts to perform literacy. In conclusion, I discuss the potential of sociocultural theories of identity formation for the field of literacy studies.

Keywords: Brazil. Cultural artifacts. Identity. Literacy. Shame.

Introduction

Eva and I sat chatting in her home made of cardboard and tarp, where she lived with her brother and his two children. The family was part of the "occupation" of public land by the Landless Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra)* in the João Pessoa neighbourhood where I was living. As soon as the families erected their makeshift dwellings and began the long wait for the municipal government to give them the legal right to the land, the local Freirean NGO set up evening literacy classes for youth and adults on one of the plots.

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I met Eva in one of these classes. As dusk settled and we waited for the bell to ring signalling that class would begin, I asked Eva, who attended the nightly basic literacy classes despite her fourth grade education and facility with reading and writing, why literacy mattered to her. She explained:

E: If someone introduces me to so-and-so, ... [and I speak] with education, and so-and-so is a studious person, he will know that I am a regular person.

LB: Regular?

E: Normal—that I'm someone with a little knowledge, that I'm not illiterate. I know how to converse, I know how to read and write. I know something, I spent some time studying. (22 July 1999)

Like so many of the youth and adult literacy students I interviewed during fieldwork in Brazil, Eva thought of literacy as intimately linked to appropriate forms of social interaction and to respectability.

In this article, I discuss the intensive social work required to "do literacy."[1] I develop insights from New Literacy Studies, sociohistorical theories of identity formation, and practice theories of language interaction to argue that "becoming literate" requires critical inter- and intra-personal identity work accomplished through engagement with cultural artifacts. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil, I show how youth and adult students use cultural artifacts in their efforts to avoid literacy shaming and to "become literate." In conclusion, I discuss the potential of sociocultural theories of identity formation for the field of literacy studies.

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Conceptual framework

Sociocultural studies of literacy: framework and terminology

This research is framed by a sociocultural approach to the study of literacy. Sociocultural studies, aka "New literacy Studies," have challenged the myth of literacy as a developmentally ordered set of skills whose acquisition has a universal impact on the learner's cognition or a society's political and economic development. Instead, they have shown that literacy "is a social process, in which particular socially constructed technologies are used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes" ((STREET, 1984, p. 97; see also BARTON; HAMILTON, 1998; BARTON; HAMILTON; IVANIČ, 1999; BAYNHAM, 1995). Eschewing a deprivation perspective, these studies assume that one cannot define literacy or its uses *a priori*, but must always examine it in social and cultural context**.**

Sociocultural scholars of literacy have challenged the notion of a singular "literacy" that does not vary by individual or situation. Instead, studies have demonstrated that the uses of reading and writing differ by domain (e.g., school, home, work, religious institution) (BARTON; HAMILTON, 1998), by language and script (MARTIN-JONES; JONES, 2000), by time period (GRAFF, 1979, 1986, 1987), by cultural context, and by situation. Such variation has led some to adopt the term "multiple literacies"—a concept that emphasizes what's *different* about the use of literacy in diverse contexts. Others prefer the term "multiliteracies," which they use to indicate that reading and writing are increasingly embedded in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts and multimodal forms—that is, that literate forms of communication are surrounded by visual, audio, spatial, and other semiotic systems (COPE; KALANTZIS). In this article, I have purposefully chosen to adopt the term "literacy practices," a concept utilized in much of the early work in New Literacy Studies (BAYNHAM, 1995; SCRIBNER; COLE, 1981; STREET, 1984). Literacy practices are the "socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy as well as the cultural significance they ascribe to those doings" ((BRANDT; CLINTON, 2002, p. 342; see also BAYNHAM, 1995, p. 1). The idea of literacy practices allows one to emphasize

how uses of literacy vary by context and social fields without closing down the possibility of what Brandt and Clinton call the "transcontextual" transfer of reading and writing, knowledge, sense of self, and expectation between contexts.

Finally, drawing on sociocultural studies of literacy, I emphasize that literacy is something one actively *does*, in concert with other humans (who may or may not be physically present) and the material, social, and symbolic world. I avoid the notion of "being" literate, because literacy is less a state of being and more an ongoing, continual accomplishment. Though I occasionally talk about "becoming" literate, by that I do not wish to fall back into a developmentalist narrative; instead, I emphasize that we are all continually "becoming" more literate. Blackburn (2002, 2002/2003, 2003) discusses "performing" literacy, in which people "read and write words and worlds such that any one performance is among innumerable other performances, each of which is both similar to and different from all of the others, both confirming and disrupting one another" (2003, p. 3). While Blackburn posits that these disjunctions open the possibility for literacy to contribute to social change, here I adopt her term to highlight the important social work done as one attempts to "seem" and "feel" literate, which are fundamental to "doing" literacy.

Situated identities and literacy practices

Contemporary literacy studies have come to rely upon the concept of identity to think about the purposeful ways in which individuals endeavor to position themselves through (and/or in conjunction with) literacy practices in social and cultural fields. By "identity," social scholars of literacy are *not* suggesting anything fixed or unified; instead, they are referring to an ongoing social process of self-making in conjunction with others through interaction; in other words, "individuals make claims about who they are by aligning and contrasting themselves with others" (MCCARTHEY; MOJE, 2002, p. 230). Identity construction, or self-making, occurs through continuous processes of identification (HALL, 1996). Sociocultural studies of literacy have established that literacy practices and social identities develop through mutual interaction. Gee (1996, 1999) showed how socially situated identities and "social languages," or (spoken or written)

"ways with words" that include different styles, registers, vocabularies, and grammars reinforce one another. Ferdman (1990) revealed how people's cultural identifications and their views of literacy inform one another. Furthermore, it has become clear that social interaction constitutes a key context for the development of literacy practices. Indeed, as Matthews and Kesner state, "[b]ecoming literate is as much about the interaction one has with others around oral and written language as it is about mastering the alphabetic system" (2003, p. 211). Moje (1995) demonstrated that teacher-student relationships are critical contexts for the teaching and learning of content-area literacies.

Such interactions matter, in part, because doing literacy is not merely about mastering a code, but largely about developing command of literacy practices that are recognized as "legitimate"; that is, situationally defined, arbitrarily sanctioned forms of reading or writing with (real or implied) legitimate audiences (BOURDIEU, 1991; HELLER, 1996). For example, Moje (2000) discussed her informants' intricate, complicated, and unsanctioned graffiti literacy practices—practices which earned them the admiration of their peers, but only vilification from others (including their teachers); Finders (1997) found that girls in junior high school worked to display "legitimate" literacy to their teachers through their academic writing and to their peers through the books that they carried (but didn't read). Thus, doing literacy necessitates crucial social work to *seem* like a legitimate person practicing literacy in a legitimate context for a legitimate audience. In other words, performing literacy requires extensive interpersonal political maneuvering and impression management. McDermott and Varenne (1995) refer to this process as "passing" as literate;[2] I think of it as learning to "seem" literate.

Yet "seeming" alone is not sufficient. One must also learn to "feel" literate in order to do literacy. McCarthey (2001) showed how students' perceptions of their own literacy abilities, and their sense of the perceptions held by their parents and teachers of those same abilities, influenced their broader sense of self. Through

2 McDermott and Varenne tell the story of a group of men who worked for many years as exterminators for New York City housing. To become fully licensed, they had to pass an exam written on an eleventh grade level; until then, they faced lower pay and the threat of losing their jobs. In this example, a specific written test became a hurdle to being "literate" and, more importantly, being "an exterminator." Yet these men were struggling to answer written questions about knowledge they used everyday on the job. The men passed the test only when other exterminators who had already succeeded taught them the test "grammar." In this case, the city arbitrarily sanctioned test literacy as legitimate language, and in order to pass as legitimate workers the men had to master the test.

an intensive case study, Mahiri and Godley (1998) revealed how one woman's sense of herself, her intelligence, and her relationships with family and community shifted radically when a physical disability made her unable to write. Though she was still technically literate, she didn't feel herself to be literate any longer.

In this article, I argue that doing literacy involves active and improvised identity work on two levels: the interpersonal (seeming) and the intrapersonal (feeling), in which one works to convince others and oneself that one is the "kind of person" who knows how to read and write. Both levels are social because they imply symbols, images, storylines, collective and individual histories, and other fully social elements. Thus, the never-ending process of learning to read and write exceeds interaction with letters, syllables, words, or texts; it involves critical, social interactional identity work as well. Drawing on theoretical work by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), I argue that *cultural artifacts* function as important tools in this identity work.

The role of cultural artifacts in performing literacy

Doing literacy involves an ongoing, improvisational process of identity work in social interaction. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) draw upon Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and actor-network theory to theorize the central role that *cultural artifacts* play in the process of improvisation. Cultural artifacts are objects or symbols inscribed by a collective attribution of meaning. An artifact can assume a material aspect (which may be as transient as a spoken word or as durable as a book) and/or an ideal or conceptual aspect (such as a label, like "good girls" and "bad boys"). Artifacts are constructed as a part of and in relation to recognized activities and *figured worlds*, or socially produced and culturally constructed "realm[s] of interpretation in which a particular set of characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (HOLLAND et al., 1998, p. 52). Examples of cultural artifacts include the poker chips and life stories significant in Alcoholics Anonymous, the crucifix adopted by many Catholic faithful, high heels and Doc

Martens, or labels like "gifted and talented" or "slow reader" in classrooms. Such artifacts "open up" figured worlds; they are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, grown into individually, and collectively developed. These cultural resources are social constructions or products of human activity, and they in turn may become tools engaged in processes of cultural production.

Cultural artifacts are essential to identity work.[3] According to Vygotsky's notion of semiotic mediation, such artifacts are central to humans' abilities to modulate their own thoughts, behavior, and emotion. From a Vygotskian perspective, through this process of "heuristic development"—a sort of opportunistic, symbolic bootstrapping—humans achieve a modicum of control over their own behavior and thus some degree of agency. Holland et al. (1998) extend Vygotsky's idea of semiotic mediation to the development of *identities in practice*. People use objectifications of social identities—e.g., images, narratives, labels, or memories of past events—to manage their own feelings and actions on a broad scale. The authors suggest that people use cultural resources, which are themselves tied to figured worlds such as "storylines, narrativity, generic characters, and desire" (125), to develop the figured aspects of their identities. In some instances, people engage these figured aspects of identity to challenge socially prescribed, "positional" aspects of identities, which "have to do with one's position relative to socially identified others, one's sense of social place, and entitlement" (125). In this way, Holland et al. unite a cultural and a social approach to the question of identity formation. They emphasize figured worlds as spaces of practice wherein actors form as well as perform. Particular persons are figured collectively in practice as fitting certain social identities and thereby positioned in power relations. Over time actors grow into such worlds, figuring themselves as actors in those worlds and gaining a sense of their position in the relations of power that characterize the particular community of practice.

Recently, Holland and I adapted this framework to address the intersection of self-making and literacy practices (BARTLETT; HOLLAND, 2002). We argued that students' efforts to become literate—and teachers' efforts to make students literate—could be best understood in relation to the figured world of "the educated

3 Leander (2002) calls these "identity artifacts," and he analyzes classroom discourse to show how students and the teacher employ identity artefacts to "stabilize" a particular interpretation of one student.

person." In this article, I extend that argument to show how students used cultural artifacts—objects, images, symbols, discourses—to modulate their actions and emotions in order to seem and feel literate.

Using Cultural Artifacts to Do Literacy in Brazil

In this section, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in two Brazilian cities, I examine how the youth and adult literacy students I interviewed used cultural artifacts in their efforts to perform literacy. First, I discuss the methods used to collect the data presented in this article, and I present relevant background information on the cultural and social context within which students engaged in literacy practices. Next, I provide concrete examples to demonstrate how these students employed cultural resources in their efforts to seem and feel literate.

Methods

The data for this article derive from a larger study which focused on the following research question: How do social and cultural factors affect the acquisition and use of literacy among youth and adult students in basic literacy programs in Brazil? As part of this study, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in adult literacy classrooms in two Brazilian cities, during which I divided my time primarily between three public school classrooms and two NGO programs. In 1995-96, I lived in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. In 1995, I spent six months in two public school classrooms of a state-funded, *supletivo* school. I observed classes four nights a week, and I interviewed nine students enrolled in the public school. In 1996, while still living in Rio, I shifted my focus to a nearby adult literacy classroom in an NGO called St. Mary's,[4] a Catholic school run by a congregation of nuns that offered night-time classes to female domestic workers. In addition to observing in the adult literacy classroom over a period of six months, I also interviewed ten St. Mary's students.

4 Following anthropological conventions, all formal names of people and organizations used in this article are pseudonyms.

In 1999, I returned to Brazil to complete the comparative ethnographic research. I elected to work in João Pessoa, a state capital in the Northeast, which is the region with the highest levels of illiteracy. For most of that year, I lived in Cruz, an extremely impoverished neighborhood. Over the course of six months, I dedicated one night per week to participant observation in the state public school's night classes in adult literacy; I interviewed ten students studying there. I dedicated the other weeknights to observation in the seven literacy classrooms offered by VIDA, the neighborhood NGO sponsored by European Catholic priests; I also interviewed twelve students enrolled in VIDA.

Data management and analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed in Portuguese; excerpts from interviews reported in this article were translated by the author but also checked for accuracy by a native Portuguese speaker who is fluent in English. Fieldnotes were recorded in notebooks during observations and then entered into a computer that facilitated elaboration on a daily basis. To analyze the data generated by observations and interviews, I employed an inductive, iterative data analysis and interpretation strategy derived from grounded theory. Every two months, I read the data from that period, noted emergent themes, wrote theoretical memos, and then indexed and coded the data. At six month intervals, I re-read all the data and the memos, drew initial conclusions, searched for negative cases, and then developed data displays to model the developing analysis.

Relevant social and cultural contexts

It is important to recognize that in Brazil literacy, and education more generally, are unequally distributed along regional, racial, and class lines. The South and Southeastern regions enjoy much higher rates of education than do the North and Northeast. Though the various regions are by and large monolingual, in 1997 the rate of illiteracy in the Southeast was nearly 9 percent, while in the

Northeast it hovered near 29 percent (HADDAD; PIERRO, 1999). Indeed, though the Northeast has only 26.8 percent of the nation's population, it is home to almost half of the nation's illiterate population. While literacy rates for white Brazilians topped 91%, rates for "blacks" and "browns" was 78% (IBGE, PNAD, 1998; HADDAD; PIERRO, 1999; HASENBALG; SILVA, 1990). Poorer students in Brazil are much less likely to have access to basic education than are wealthier students: for example, in rural areas, children from families in the poorest quartile have completed, on average, 1.7 years of schooling, while those in the highest quartile have completed 5.4 years; in urban areas the numbers are 3.9 and 10.3 years, respectively (CEPAL 1999, p. 294). This skewed distribution is related to a number of factors, including, but not limited to, availability and quality of schooling, family income and the opportunity cost of schooling a child, the child's comfort in the school, and the child's school readiness.

In my work with youth and adult literacy students in Brazil, those who appeared to have at least a lower middle class income, had lighter skin, and were from the South or Southeast were often presumed to be literate, while those who had darker skin, were poorer, and/or came from the North, the Northeast, or rural areas were often presumed to be illiterate. On several occasions informants expressed their surprise upon learning that a person of "good appearance" who "spoke well" did not know how to read. By "good appearance," they meant a lighter-skinned person who was dressed in clothing that indicated at least a lower-middle class income. By "speaking well," they meant that the person spoke something akin to standard Portuguese. In short, those who reflect a comparatively advantageous class and race status *seem* literate, and are often given the benefit of the doubt.

Over the course of interviewing the 41 adult literacy students, I consistently heard elaborate, poignant narratives of the shaming they had experienced because they didn't know how to read, write or speak correctly. These narratives were usually prompted by a single question in the interview: What difficulties have you encountered as a result of not being able to read and write? In response to this question, one young man discussed his terror as a boy of being called upon by the teacher to read in front of the class; several explained their shame over having to leave their thumbprints rather than being able to sign their names during an election. One man discussed how embarrassed he was to admit to the clients in

the hair salon where he worked that he could not read and the strategies he used to "pass" for literate. Informants described their unease being in banks, health clinics, or other environments with complex bureaucratic literacies.

Moreover, their shame narratives extended to oral events. Despite the fact that the question asked about problems resulting from not being able to read or write, people regularly responded with comments about their speech, rather than (or in addition to) reading and writing. They talked at great length about the shame of speaking in unfriendly circumstances, when their speech patterns exposed them to ridicule. Informants avoided interacting with and speaking in front of others so as to avoid shaming, or they modified their speech in order to fit in. As one woman reported, "There's always someone correcting you, calling you out, 'You're wrong, you're talking incorrectly.' Others hear that, and they think it's funny to make fun of you. That makes you feel ashamed, and you learn to talk like others talk" (Vera April, 1996).

The students I interviewed thought of speech patterns as intimately tied to literacy abilities, and they thought that learning to read and write more proficiently would also help them learn to "speak correctly." All but two of the 41 students I interviewed described without prompting moments when other people tried to shame them about their inability to read or write something and/or about the "uneducated" way in which they spoke. Literacy shaming in this context functioned as a potent, and in many ways, debilitating form of symbolic violence, which is Bourdieu's term for the denigration of a person's bases for claiming social value (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1977). Such denigration reflected negatively on the person's social standing and ability to command respect, and therefore on his/her capacities to either "seem" or "feel" literate.

The students I interviewed suggested that literacy shaming made "doing literacy" feel risky, because one was essentially staking a claim for respect. They detailed elaborate strategies that they used to avoid reading, writing, or speaking in front of people that they didn't trust. In these situations, cultural resources seemed to provide important tools that students could use to manage their feelings of shame (or the anticipation of shame) and perform literacy.

In what follows, I provide several examples from observations and interviews to illustrate how students used objects, labels, or other symbols in their efforts to

seem and to feel literate. The first set present more obvious examples of material objects; the second set include a discussion of how students cultivated a particular sense of self in order to do literacy.

Material cultural artifacts

Not surprisingly, students often used artifacts related to reading and writing to develop a sense of themselves as readers and writers. During informal observations with the students I interviewed, I noticed that they often carried pencil cases, printed matter such as the Bible, or other materials, even at times when they did not need or use these materials. Other items were even more specialized. For example, one woman liked to carry small religious bookmarks that she would give as gifts to people; she told me that these bookmarks made her feel closer to the word of God and to being "educated." During a visit to the home of a student named Dalva, I saw that she had tacked a blackboard to the wall in her kitchen. As we sat at the kitchen table chatting, Dalva's daughter started to use the blackboard to "play school." Dalva interrupted our conversation to warn her daughter not to erase the word "*trabalho*," which Dalva had written in the corner of the board. "*Trabalho,*" or work, had been the theme of discussions and lessons in literacy class that week. When I asked Dalva why she didn't want the word erased, she said, "Because looking at it makes me feel less stupid" [literally, 'less animal'] (6 August 1999). Dalva went on to explain how knowing that she could write her name on the blackboard had helped her when she had to sign her name on an official document at work.

Items that signified student status were also important to the people I interviewed. One woman told me she rarely left home without her *pasta,* a plastic folder students used to carry papers. When I asked her why, she said it was so that others would know she could "read a little." One man told me he liked to wear his school t-shirt not only because it allowed him to ride the bus for free, but so that others would know he was studying.

Non-physical cultural artifacts

In other instances, students used a more abstract sense of self to enable their literacy practices. In this section, I provide two extended examples of the ways in which students used such a sense of self to perform literacy. In the first example, Graça told me why studying in a Freirean literacy program helped her to perform literacy in public; in the second example, Eunisa explained how her sense of herself as a religious woman helped her face the scorn she expected to receive from a bureaucrat and sign her name.

Graça

Graça is a self-identified *negra*, or black woman, who grew up in a poor rural area of Minas Gerais (a large, mountainous state bordering Rio de Janeiro), where her family worked as sharecroppers. As a child, she was never allowed to attend the school, located two miles away, because her household needed her labor from her earliest years. During our two hour interview, she talked about the prohibition, as a poor black, against speaking to the landowners in the region, unless in response to a direct question. Graça explained that, when she turned 14, her parents sent her to the city of Rio de Janeiro to work as a maid. In a South Zone apartment facing the famous beaches of Leblon, she worked from 5 AM until 11 PM single-handedly cooking, cleaning, and caring for two parents and their four children, the oldest of whom was two years her senior. Graça told me that she vividly remembered one moment from her time with that family. In the midst of cleaning the room of the younger children, a particularly colorful book caught her eye, and she wandered over to pick it up. Just at that moment, her *patroa*, or boss, walked in the room and started yelling, "Don't touch that! I forbid you to touch their books! You don't have time for that. Besides, what would you learn for?" Graça complied, hurriedly replacing the book on the shelf and returning to her chores. Years later, during our interview, she reported, "Those words stayed in my head. What would I learn for? Why would a person like me study? I was never going to get out of that life of slavery. I felt sad and absolutely isolated."

Graça told me that, for many years, she was haunted by those words; she felt she wasn't the kind of person who deserved to know how to read or write, and so

she didn't seek to learn. However, many years after she had stopped working for the family mentioned above, she met a woman at church who was attending St. Mary's, the Catholic NGO in Rio. At this woman's invitation, Graça too began to attend. Gradually, according to Graça, she started to think of herself as the kind of person who could and should learn to read and write. At the time of our interview, Graça had been attending St. Mary's for three years, and she was still at the first grade level; in other words, she had not developed rapidly in the traditional sense of becoming literate. However, when I asked her, "How are you different now that you are studying here?", Graça replied:

> I talk more with people. I'm happier. I used to be ashamed to enter places. For example, if there was a party, I wouldn't go, because I thought since I was black I couldn't mix with whites.… For us, being black, and not knowing how to speak, and not knowing how to read a word, you are isolated. Because you don't know how to speak, other people don't pay attention to you, because you don't know how ... to converse with people. Now it's different. I arrive in any place, I know how to talk, I know how to buy things, I don't have that shame to look at people. I have confidence. I know that I will arrive [in a store] and people will wait on me.

In other words, Graça felt that being enrolled in the Freirean literacy program had helped her feel that she was the kind of person who could inhabit commercial and social spaces and expect respect. Before attending the literacy program, the weight of anticipated racism combined with prejudice against those who do not know how to read had prevented her from risking participation in diverse social spaces; she felt that the instruction at St. Mary's had helped her master speech routines and interaction patterns that made her presence in those public spaces viable. In this case, Graça's sense of self as a person worthy of respect functioned as what we might call a cultural artifact—a tool that allowed her to risk talking, writing, and reading in front of others.

Eunisa

During fieldwork, adult literacy students related to me stories that suggested that they used such cultural artifacts in order to assert their literacy. For example,

consider the following statement by Eunisa, a dark-skinned woman of African descent who self-identified to me as *morena*—a very flexible racial category in Brazil that includes people with brown hair and a wide variety of skin shades. At the time of our interview Eunisa was 33 years old, married, with no children. She was living in the poorest area of a poor neighborhood in João Pessoa, where I worked and lived for a year in 1999. As a child, Eunisa had gone to school for only one year before having to drop out and take care of her younger siblings. As an adult, she had studied one year in a neighborhood-based Freirean literacy program before matriculating at the public adult night school. In her adolescence, Eunisa worked as a maid, but at the time of the interview she had been unemployed for years. The year I knew her, Eunisa was heavily involved in one of the evangelical churches that had sprung up in the neighborhood.

During one of my visits to her home, and at my request, Eunisa was discussing the limitations placed on her life by not knowing how to read and write. When I asked her to give an example, she offered the following story:

> One day I went to get my Voter's Card (*titulo de eleitor*). This guy took us for free.… He's a town councilman. Poor thing, many times he runs for office and doesn't win. He came to get us, a group of us, in a car ... to get our documents for free. When we arrived, there were a lot of people.... So we got in line, a lot of us, and a man said, "Whoever is going to sign, sign here." And the girl beside me, Betânia, she also later studied at [the NGO], but then she quit. The man said, "Who's going to sign?" And Betânia said, "Me, but I'm not going to sign, I'm going to use my fingerprint." And the man said, "Here's the 'father of the donkeys'" (*pai dos burros*), which was the pad of ink to wet your finger and put in on the [document.][5] And I got so ashamed, my God, you know?... I knew how to write my name, but I had forgotten. My husband, when I would go to do any document, he would write my name on a sheet of paper for me to copy the length of the page, so I could remember. This was before I went back to school.... [So I prayed,] my God, God help me; help me sign my name because I don't want to be embarrassed. [Betânia] had already finished, and he said to me, "Come, here's the 'father of the donkeys.'" I felt so ashamed, and I thought, my God, I'm going to sign my name, one way or another. I said, "Look, I don't know how to sign well, okay? But I want to try." Because he had already said that to the other woman, and I felt ashamed... He said, "Do it slowly, that's fine, no problem." Another guy showed up and said, "No problem, don't hurry yourself." So I picked up

5 'Donkey' is a common insult applied to people who don't know how to read or write.

the pen and signed. My name was kind of crooked but it came out.

The experience of registering to vote is a famously painful one for people who have difficulty signing their names. The inkpad has become a powerful (and for some dreadful) artifact in bureaucratic literacy events. It is collectively imbued with meaning. The "father of donkeys", when proffered to Betânia and Eunisa, positioned them as illiterates. Eunisa wished to instead position herself as someone who knew how to sign her name, and she prayed to God for help. Eunisa's identity as a devout member of a charismatic Protestant sect helped her manage her sense of shame and "do literacy." In this instance, Eunisa's capacity to sign her name was not in question. She had done it literally hundreds of times before in the privacy of her home. However, her identity as a literate person was in jeopardy. She didn't "seem" literate— the literate official assumed that she was incapable of signing her name. Nor did she "feel" literate—her feelings of shame almost overwhelmed her literacy abilities. But Eunisa relied on a cultural artifact—her sense of herself as a person of God, with whom all things are possible—in order to engage in literacy.

Discussion

Identity work, conducted with and through compelling cultural artifacts, is central to performing literacy. The students adopted a variety of cultural artifacts—some of them obvious (a blackboard, writing implements, books, student folders, bookmarks) and some of them less obvious (a sense of self as a person deserving respect; a sense of self as a religious person). None of these artifacts "made" students literate. Instead, students adopted cultural tools that would help them seem and feel literate.

Students used cultural artifacts to manage their own feelings about the threat of being considered "illiterate," and in many cases to risk asserting themselves as literate. For example, Dalva used the visual image of words on her chalkboard to remind herself that she was capable of writing; Graça used her sense of herself as

a student, and perhaps the discourses about equality she had heard in a Freirean classroom, to have the courage to occupy social and commercial spaces where she might be called upon to read or write; Eunisa used her relationship with God to counter the threat of being positioned as illiterate and to sign her name. These students used images, narratives, labels, memories of past events, and material objects to challenge socially prescribed, positional aspects of identities and to "do" literacy.

The data presented here reveal the important role played by cultural resources in the ongoing processes of becoming more literate. While artifacts undoubtedly play a role in all literacy practices, they may prove particularly important for those whose literacy legitimacy or literacy performances are under particularly intense scrutiny, as was the case with these women who lacked formal education and could not read or write in any dominant literacy register.

Implications

This article contributes to sociocultural studies of literacy in several ways. First, much of the work in New Literacy Studies and in critical literacy tends to overemphasize either structure or agency; that is, some studies grant too much autonomy to local uses of literacy, others hopefully (but unrealistically) herald the potential for literacy practices to interrupt enduring inequalities, and others pessimistically argue that literacy practices have little impact on social change. In this article, I have shown how people can and do use cultural resources to contest social positioning. While they may not always succeed in repositioning themselves, these efforts open important possibilities for small-scale changes.

Second, by demonstrating the intense inter- and intra-personal work involved in engaging in literacy practices, the data serve as a healthy reminder that efforts to study or instruct "basic" literacy students should not neglect the critical social dimension of literacy practices. Furthermore, this "person-centered" approach opens the possibility for a connection to psychological approaches to literacy, something that has been missing in social studies of literacy, which have developed, in large measure, as a reaction against psychological approaches.

The concept of cultural artifacts offers particular promise to the field's ongoing fascination with the concept of identity, since cultural resources are key to self-making. Studies of literacy and identity could profit from attending to other elements of Holland et al.'s sociocultural approach, and some scholars have initiated these efforts. Blackburn (2003) uses three concepts from Holland et al.—figured world, positionality, and space of authoring—to analyze one young woman's efforts to make space for herself as a lesbian, which she does in part through literacy practices. Blackburn's linkage of identity studies to discussions of space and place offer one promising route for development in literacy studies.

The concept of cultural artifacts could be incorporated profitably in the examination of several other topics that are current in the field of literacy studies, including students' use of popular culture in their literacy practices and the development of multilingual literacies. For example, studies by Alvermann and colleagues (ALVERMANN; HAGOOD, 2000; ALVERMANN; HERON, 2001; ALVERMANN et al., 1999), Dyson (1993, 1994, 1997) and Morrell (2002) have revealed how students adopt personages, storylines, or symbols from media sources and employ them as they develop new literacy practices. We have much to learn from comparing the figured worlds evoked by these resources and considering who uses what types of artifacts, to what ends, and with what success.

This theoretical approach to situated identities and doing literacy is beginning to be explored in the burgeoning field of multilingual literacies. For example, Beynon and her co-authors (2003) employ the framework from Holland et al. to consider the ways in which teachers of Chinese and Punjabi ancestry represented their identities in minority languages in various sociocultural settings. Dagenais et al. (under review) use the framework to discuss how "certain resources (say, a "standard" variety of a language) … *enable* persons who have access to them to claim certain identities, and thus to engage in particular practices, but this access may also *constrain* a person's claim to other sorts of identities and legitimacy to participate in other practices." Specifically, they examine the ways in which one student positioned herself and was positioned by others, in part through literacy practices, in relation to the figured world of a French immersion classroom. There is still much work to be done in the area of multilingual literacies to examine how students and teachers employ cultural artifacts and figured worlds in their efforts

to construct, use and teach legitimate literacies.

In these and other areas, the perspective that I have developed here—a person-centered, social analysis of continuously becoming more literate through reliance upon cultural resources—holds potential to enrich the field of literacy studies.

Short title des identités situées et des pratiques de la littéracie: paraître et sentir

Résumé

Cet article examine la centralité des ressources culturelles ou *produits [artifacts]* dans le processus social de "produire la littéracie." En basant sur des développements récents dans le domaine des théories socioculturelles de la formation continue de l'identité, je défends l'idée que les gens emploient des produits culturels pour faire semblant d'être *littératisés* ou pour être vus comme *littératisés* par les autres et pour "se sentir" *littératisés*, c'est-à-dire, pour développer une idée d'eux-mêmes en tant que *littératisés*. À partir du domaine etnographique du Brésil, je montre comment des jeunes gens et des adultes en cours d'alphabétisation utilisent des *produits* culturels dans leurs efforts pour représenter la littéracie. À titre de conclusion, je discute le potentiel des théories socioculturelles de la formation de l'identité pour le domaine des études de la littéracie.

Mots-clefs**:** Brésil, produits culturels, identité, littératie, honte

Breves títulos de identidades situadas e práticas de letramento: parecer e sentir

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a relevância dos recursos culturais ou *artefatos* no processo social do "fazer letramento". Com base em desenvolvimentos recentes nas teorias socioculturais de formação de identidade contínua, assumo que as pessoas empregam artefatos culturais para "parecerem" letradas, ou para serem vistas como letradas pelos outros e se "sentirem" letradas, isto é, desenvolverem um sentido de si mesmas como letradas.

Fundamentando-me em um trabalho de campo realizado no Brasil, demonstro como os estudantes do curso de alfabetização para jovens e adultos usam artefatos culturais em seus esforços para desempenharem o letramento. Concluindo, discuto o potencial das teorias socioculturais sobre formação de identidade para o campo dos estudos de letramento.

Palavras-chave: Brasil. Artefatos culturais. Identidade. Letramento. Vergonha

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